

Velius Longus

prologue to *On Orthography*

translated by L.K.M. Maisel

from the Latin text established by H. Keil¹

[*On Orthography*, written roughly around the turn of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, is for the most part concerned with minutiae of Latin spelling; but what may be called the prologue, the first eight pages of the edition, is of more general interest, as it discusses the nature of alphabetic writing, some points of what we would now call linguistics, and the historical character of the Roman letters.]

<the definition of letters>

It is necessary, I think, when someone undertakes to write a treatise on orthography, that they should begin from the values of letters. First of all, then, the definition of letters – but many different ones have been advanced. Some define the letter as the constitutive element² of *articulated* utterance, but according to others, it is the constitutive element of *meaningful* utterance. Others again hold it to be the smallest unit of speech. Yet some have rejected this; their definition holds that letters are the constitutive element of *written* utterance. But they have all taken exception to the definition advanced by those who call letters the constitutive elements of meaningful utterance. We can, after all, write out utterances even if they communicate no meaning, e.g. if we said TITTIR. This can certainly be written, but it means nothing at all. So, it is nearer to the truth that they are either the constitutive elements of written or of articulated utterance.

Next, some have said that all letters are vowels (*vocales*),³ being convinced that no letter is more or less indispensable, and also because all letters are expressed as sounds (*voces*). Some have said the opposite, that all letters are consonants, because when, for instance, you write CATO, the A is pronounced together with the C just as much as the C is pronounced together with the A. We know, however, that the differentiation between vowel and consonant is more subtle than this: the letters called vowels are those which are needed to make a syllable, and the others, which are pronounced together with them, are called consonants; their presence adds nothing and takes nothing away from the syllable's being a syllable.

Still, there are people who argue that there can be syllables without vowels. If we turn to the writers of Comedy, for example, we find S and T written together as one word, for example in Terence's *Phormio* (742–743):

Sophrone: What? So you aren't the person you always said you were?

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¹ Heinrich Keil, *Grammatici Latini*, 1855–1880, vol. 7, pp. 46–81 (archive.org). I have also used the digital text of the wonderful [Corpus Grammaticorum Latinorum](http://corpusgrammaticorum.com) project, which reproduces that of Keil's edition.

² For *initium*. 'Smallest unit' translates *minima pars*, essentially a synonym.

³ The Latin terms carry the connotations that vowels are articulations of sound, while consonants are merely *co*-articulated and incapable of being pronounced individually. In that sense they are secondary to and dependent on the vowels.

Chremes: St!⁴

Sophrona: Why are you so afraid of the door?

Here the combination of S and T is a command to be silent. But considered in this light, most consonants and all semivowels⁵ could stand as syllables. For in Lucilius' *Satires*, book 9, where he talks about the letters, they all fill the role of syllables, as when he says:

R⁶ – it's not a big deal for me to take that ill-compounded and dog-like word into my mouth; it's not my fault – that's what it's called!

And again:

Our s⁷ and what we call Sigma in a half-Greek way has no fault in it.

It is clear, then, that they hold the position of syllables,⁸ but they are still not syllables, and we should not accept the argument of those who think that there can be syllables without a vowel. They say that a combination of semivowels can be sufficient as meaningful utterance, because ST commands silence. But they are mistaken: X too means something, since that is how we call the letter, and still it is neither a syllable nor a word (*lexis*). It consists of C and s,⁹ but people do not call it a syllable on that account, but only a double letter.

Finally, what about the fact that unwritten utterances also have meaning, although they cannot be represented in writing? For we can tell children to respond with the sound of fingers.¹⁰

Let us begin, now, to treat the values of the letters.

<the values of the vowels>

First, I will discuss the values of our¹¹ vowels, which are the same as those of the ancient Greeks,¹² as far as the ambiguity of vowel length is concerned. At one time, they only had five vowels – α ε ι ο υ – and these could all be pronounced as either long or short, as is still the case with α ι υ, which are called *koinai* (κοιναί, 'common, ambiguous') in Greek. Later, as some think, Simonides invented the two vowels he called *phúsei makrás* (φύσει μακράς, 'long by

⁴ Latin *st* means the same as English 'St!', 'Sh!' or 'Hush!'. Metrically, it scans as a long syllable in this line of iambic octonarius.

⁵ Not semivowels in the modern sense (*w* and *y*) but, in linguistic terms, all continuants: F L M N R S, as well as consonantal I and V. The other consonants, like P or D, are "mute" (stops in linguistic terms).

⁶ Metrically, R scans as its own syllable in this line of hexameter verse, but against Velius, who seems to have pronounced it as just /r/, it seems more likely that Lucilius intended the pronunciation ER or /er/, which 1. is the name of the letter (as 'ar' is its English name), 2. is "compounded" (*caco-syntheton*) from two sounds, and 3. is presumably a Latin equivalent to the English "arf" for a dog's bark. Velius' point still stands in the sense that it is possible for him to pronounce the R without adding a vowel.

⁷ The Latin name for S is ES, just as in English, but Lucilius seems to be saying that it (and not only the Greek letter) was also called Sigma.

⁸ Both in language in general (vowel-less R is not a syllable but equivalent to one), and in the quoted examples metrically (it occupies the position of the first syllable in the verse).

⁹ So Velius pronounces the name of the letter as X or /ks/, not as IX (the usual Latin name, as 'ex' is the English name of X).

¹⁰ Velius has ranged discursively over the different definitions, but he leaves off without coming to a real conclusion.

¹¹ I.e. the Latin vowels.

¹² Naturally not his contemporaries but the Greeks of more than 700 years earlier, prior to the time of Simonides, who was active in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE.

nature'), namely η and ω , as the counterparts ($\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\omicron\iota\chi\omicron\iota$) to ϵ and \omicron , so that in the same manner that the letters η and ω were called long, the others would be short by nature.

There can be no doubt for anyone who has ears that our names for the vowels are more natural than those which the Greeks use. The Latin vowels are the names of letters and at the same syllables, unlike the other letters. When we say Alpha, for instance, this refers only to the Greek letter α ; but when if we say A, we are both naming the Latin letter and speaking a syllable.¹³

Of these vowel letters that are current among us, two – namely v ¹⁴ and i – have the value of consonants as well as vowels. I will briefly explain how to differentiate between those double values. It is a fact that every syllable must have a vowel, while consonants have the status of additions,¹⁵ so that a change of consonants does not affect the nature of the syllable. [It is still a syllable.]¹⁶ So just as it makes no difference whether we should say A or BA, it makes as little difference to say IA or VA. If it is really two vowels that are joined, together they would clearly make a long vowel,¹⁷ and in that case the addition of this letter had to make the syllable long. If, on the contrary, it is a consonant, then by the rules of poetic meter it precedes the syllable. Now, when I read

ET IACIT, ARRECTAE MENTES STVPEFACTAQVE CORDA (Vergil, *Aeneid* 5.643),

the first metrical foot, ET IACIT, is a dactylus (one long syllable followed by two short ones). And it is still a dactylus if I exchange that I and say it with a different consonant instead, e.g. ET FACIT.¹⁸ And take note of this as well, that this letter¹⁹ is often pronounced as two consonants if it stands singly between two vowels.²⁰

Again, no one will doubt that the following verse is sound:

IAM VITVLOS HORTARE VIAMQVE INSISTE DOMANDI (Vergil, *Georgics* 3.164).

IAM VITV is a dactylus, because the first syllable is long by position. The consonant M is followed by the letter V, which has the value of a consonant.²¹ Equally, when V is fused with Q, it has the value of a consonant,²² as when I say:

ARMA VIRVMQVE CANO (Vergil, *Aeneid* 1.1),

¹³ The use of the word syllable is a little misleading in English translation. The point is simply that the letter's name and the sound it represents are the same. But we see here as elsewhere that for Velius, the prototypical syllable is a simple vowel, where other grammarians thought that a syllable in the narrowest sense had to be a combination of sounds.

¹⁴ The Latin script originally did not distinguish V and U.

¹⁵ This is the editor Heinrich Keil's guess for what the sentence is supposed to mean; as transmitted, the text is meaningless.

¹⁶ My addition.

¹⁷ It is a general rule of Greek and Latin metrics that diphthongs (e.g. AU or OE) make for a long syllable.

¹⁸ On its own, ET is short; but a syllable with a short vowel followed by two consonants counts as long – long by position rather than long by nature. If the first I in IACIT was a vowel, and if IA in consequence was a diphthong, then ET IACIT would count as short-long-short rather than long-short-short, which would break the dactylic meter.

¹⁹ The letter I specifically; the same is not true for V.

²⁰ The word TROIA, for example, is spoken with a short O and written with only a single I. The I, however, is pronounced as if it were a double consonant, making the first syllable long by position. In phonetic transcription: /trɔj:a/.

²¹ Accordingly we now transcribe this as *vitulos*, or sometimes *uitulos*, but never as *vitvlos* or *uitvlos*.

²² More precisely, V is not a vowel, but fused into a *single* consonant with Q. In phonetic transcription, QVE is /k^wε/ rather than /k^wε/.

and

QVISQVIS ES ARMATVS (Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.388).

As we said before, two vowels are never joined without making for a long syllable. But QVE is clearly²³ a short syllable, and neither will anyone doubt that the metrical foot QVISQVIS ES is a dactylus, whose first syllable is long.

Verrius Flaccus was of the opinion that our letter v was the same as the Greek υ. He argued this on the basis of the following examples:

what they call *kýminon* (κύμινον), we call CVMINVM;

what they call *kypárisson* (κυπάρισσον), we call CVPRESSVM;

who they call *kybernētēn* (κυβερνήτην), we call GVBERNATOREM;

And he strengthens his case with Theseus [Θησεύς], Menoeceus [Μενουκεύς], Peleus [Πηλεύς] and the like.

Those among the Greeks who have written treatises about the ancient letters, and also those of the Latins who have followed them, do indeed show that the ancients used to write *makrós* (μακρός), *makroû* (μακροῦ) and *makrôî* (μακρῶ) with the same letter,²⁴ and that o and ου and ω were not differentiated. And our ancient writers also demonstrate this, since they also confused O and V. They used to write CONSOL with an O, though we now read it as CONSVL with a v. This is also why we see different spellings of many words, like FONTES and FVNTES or FRONDES and FRVNDES.

The letter I is sometimes thin, sometimes broad, e.g. in PRODIT VINCIT CONDIT I would pronounce it as thinner, but where it means PRODIRE VINCIRE CONDIRE it comes out broad.²⁵

There is even some uncertainty between the use of I and V, as in OPTVMVS MAXVMVS [or OPTIMVS MAXIMVS]. We should not what Cicero says about this, namely that ancient, rustic pronunciation employed a fuller sound and that they used to write and pronounce words of this type with v. But those grammarians who have thought that the superlatives must be pronounced with v were in error. If we concede to them as far as the words OPTIMVS MAXIMVS PVLCHERRIMVS IVSTISSIMVS are concerned [and pronounce them OPTVMVS MAXVMVS PVLCHERRVMVS IVSTISSVMVS], what will they do in the case of nouns, where the same question still remains even if we set the superlatives aside. For example, is it MANVBIAE or MANIBIAE, LIBIDO or LVBIDO? As a matter of fact, the thinner pronunciation is now preferred, so that we have replaced that broad sound with the letter I, although we still do not pronounce it entirely as the letter I. And while we might well concede to those who follow ancient usage that these nouns be written with v, still they ought not pronounce it as they write it.²⁶

²³ “Clearly”, since RUMQVE CA is another dactylus.

²⁴ Before the convention of writing the two different long O-sounds as OY and Ω, all three were written the same, so ΜΑΚΡΟΞ, ΜΑΚΡΟ, ΜΑΚΡΟΙ.

²⁵ The point is not, it seems, that I in the ending IT or /it/ is short, while in the ending IRE or /i:re/ it is long, but rather (as suggested by W.M. Lindsay, *The Latin Language*, 1894, p. 27) that the ending IT is pronounced differently in the third and fourth conjugation: PRODIT VINCIT CONDIT can be either (third conjugation from PRODO VINCO CONDO, fourth conjugation from PRODEO VINCIO CONDIO). What this difference in pronunciation would have been is unclear; is it the same as the not-fully-I sound discussed in the next paragraph?

²⁶ So there is a sound unlike or inbetween I and V, and while it is acceptable to write it as either I or V, it is not acceptable to pronounce it as an ordinary V (or as an ordinary I, probably).

<semivowels>²⁷

Some exclude the letter X from the semivowels, based on the same reasoning by which the ancient Latins repudiated the Greek letter υ [= our letter Y].²⁸

The Latin language does not know Z, and it was never used except when foreign names [...] this sound [...]. And if someone thinks that Mezentius is a Latin name, let him know that it used to be written and also pronounced with two S.

Most do count these letters as semivowels, though Verrius Flaccus preferred to see them as mute consonants, because they begin from mutes, the one [X] from C, the other [Z] from D. As for those who are swayed by their ending in semivowels, let them know, he says, that the letter Z is written as SD by those who think that it consists of S and D, so that it doubtless ends in a mute.

For my part, I do not think that it was ever foreign to Latin speech, since it is found even in the *carmen Saliare*,²⁹ and it seems to me that Z is one thing, and *sigma kai d* (σίγμα καὶ δ, ‘S and D’) another. They have neither the same value nor the same sound, but are pronunciations from different dialects. We know that

the Dorians say *melisdein* (μελίσδειν), others *melizein* (μελίζειν),
and likewise that *paizein* (παίζειν) is pronounced *paisdein* (παίσδειν) by others.

This does not make them the same letter, no more than when

some say *kebalén* (κεβαλήν) and others *kephalén* (κεφαλήν),
some *óppata* (ὄππατα), others *ómmata* (ὄμματα),
some *thálattan* (θάλατταν), others *thálassan* (θάλασσαν),

although they do mean the same thing. Z and SD are not the same thing, just as σίγμα καὶ δ and ζ are not the same.

And if anyone wanted to excise that letter [because they want to write it] according to nature [i.e. as its constituent sounds], they will find that it is not in fact a double letter, if only they will hear it with an honest ear. It will sound one way written singly, but differently when doubled, which does not hold true at all for a double letter. Write one Z and consult your ear: *azēkhēs* (ἀζηχῆς) will not sound like *asdēkhēs* (ἄσδηχῆς). But let it be doubled, and it will be *azzēkhēs*, in the same way as [the s in] *assēkhēs* [is doubled]. And if, when I say the sound of that letter (doubled), there is anything following it, you will find that it is just the same sound with which

²⁷ The uncontroversial semivowels, which are not discussed by Velius, are F and S, M and N, L and R, and consonantal I and V. In modern linguistic terms, they are all approximants, and the first two specifically fricatives, the second nasals, the third liquids, the last semivowels in the modern sense.

²⁸ In antiquity, what we now regard as the Roman letter y was not distinguished from the Greek letter υ – and they are both still capitalized as Y. This is why Velius did not discuss it among the vowels, except as a possible Greek counterpart to the Latin v. On the other hand, Velius is clearly not agreeing with those who did not want to admit the new letters X Y Z into the alphabet. This had long since ceased to be a live debate.

²⁹ The song of the Salians – Roman priests of Mars – was one of the oldest texts in the Latin language.

it began. But if someone should pronounce the double letters *ps* (ψ) or *ks* (ξ), they will hear an s at the end, and nothing of the sounds with which they began.³⁰

<mute consonants>³¹

Some want to exclude the letter H from the mutes as more of a sound than a letter, and as a mere accident³² of letters. And they appeal to the authority of the Greeks, who have removed it as if it were superfluous. That they also used to have it is evident from their ancient writings and from the fact that even today they always write the first letter of the number they want to write, like Δ for *déka* (δέκα, ‘ten’), Π for *pentékonta* (πεντήκοντα, ‘fifty’), and, to come to the point, H for *hekatón* (ἑκατόν, ‘hundred’). From this we can see that this letter did not have the status of a mere aspiration; otherwise they would have denoted *hekatón* by an E.³³ In this way, those who defend it as a letter show that it has the same force as a consonant. It also asserts its force in poetic meters, since those verses of Homer in which an aspiration lengthens a preceding syllable are not regarded as faulty:

ἦ ὀλίγον οἱ παῖδα ἐοικότα γείνατο Τυδεύς (Homer, *Iliad* 5.800).³⁴

And it is so much the more a letter as it can even lengthen a syllable with the force of two consonants, e.g.:

ὥς εἰπὼν τόξον μὲν ἀπὸ ἔο θῆκε χαμᾶζε (Homer, *Odyssey* 21.136).³⁵

And though I have not considered a Latin example yet, there are many cases like the above, e.g.:

ILLE LATVS NIVEVM MOLLI FVLTVS HYACINTHO (Vergil, *Eclogues* 6.53).³⁶

There is this as well, that, if it were a mere accident of a letter, it would be pronounced together with the letter. But in fact it is pronounced before as well as after a vowel. As the syllable CA is not the same as AC, and BA is not AB, so also HA and AH are different.³⁷

They also believe they can deduce that it is an consonant and contributes to meaning, because adding or removing it changes a word’s meaning, seeing that there is a distinction between HIRA (‘empty gut’) and IRA (‘wrath’). [...] [But this is insufficient,] since there are [also] many words which mean one thing when a certain syllable is short, but something else when it is long, as with the difference between the lengthened PĪLA (‘pillar’) and the shortened PĪLA (‘ball’). And for another thing, a change of accent can also change the part of speech, as CÍRCVM is [a noun or adverb], CIRCV̄M is [a preposition], and ÉRGŌ is [a conjunction], ERGŌ̄ is [a postposition].

³⁰ What all this comes to is that, in Velius’ time, Z, whether in Greek or in Latin, was generally pronounced as it is in English today, as a /z/, and not /zd/ and /dz/. Whether doubling or gemination of Greek ζ /z/ to ζζ /z:/ really worked in the way Velius claims seems less certain to me.

³¹ The uncontroversial mute consonants, which are not discussed, are P B T D G.

³² That is, as an extrinsic addition to the letters proper.

³³ There are arguably two separate points here: one, that the Greeks used to use the letter H, and two, that they regarded it as a full letter. In Velius’ time, aspiration was firstly not denoted by H but by a symbol placed above the vowel, as in ἔ, and secondly, it was regarded as a modifier of the vowel sound, not as a separate letter.

³⁴ (ἦ ὀλί)γον οἱ or *gon hoi* is a spondee (two long syllables); *gon* is long despite having a short vowel.

³⁵ (ἄ)πὸ ἔο or *po heo* is a dactyl (long syllable followed by two short), and this despite *po* being a short, open syllable.

³⁶ TVS HYA is a dactyl.

³⁷ Unlike in English, where the H in ‘ah’ would not be pronounced unless another vowel followed (‘aha’). Word-final H is very uncommon in Latin, however, appearing almost exclusively in interjections.

I say then that the arguments I gave above are stronger, vindicating that aspiration, so that it may be regarded to have the status of a letter.³⁸

Finally, there is the issue of the mutes K and C and Q,³⁹ namely whether they are actually needed in writing. Those who exclude K say that it is less a letter than a symbol, which we use to abbreviate KALUMNIA, KAPUT and KALENDAE; it is also short for the name KAESO.⁴⁰ Accordingly, there is no more need to count it as a letter than the symbol which means CENTVRIA, or the reversed C which means GAIA.⁴¹ We see this kind of symbol inscribed on monuments when someone is described as a woman's freedman, since all women are metonymically called GAIA's.⁴²

But those who defend the status of K as a letter think that it is needed for the words which begin with it, followed by an A. This is why some punctilious people (*religiosi*) spell KARISSIME ('my dear...') with K and A when they write letters. But if it is needed for this reason, I am afraid we will have to start looking for other letters to write CICERO or COMMODUS.⁴³

A question is also raised about Q, and many exclude it, on the argument that it is nothing else than C plus V and that you can just as well write QVIS as C plus V and I and S. And the symbol itself, if you will only consider the ancient shape of the letter, shows that it is the letters C and V fused together;⁴⁴ and hence many write QVIS as Q plus I and S, QVAE as QAE, and QVID as QID. No doubt Q already contains V. We will speak about this later, when we come to orthography. But now we must go on to the questions which arise about the principles of spelling (*rationem scribendi*).

³⁸ I am not positive that I have captured the sense of this sentence.

³⁹ The names of these letters were KA /ka:/ and CE /ke:/ and QU /ku:/.

⁴⁰ It is probably true that K stayed in use in part because it had become a useful abbreviation. K for KALUMNIA was presumably used in juristic settings (in the sense 'malicious prosecution'), K for KAPUT ('head, heading, chapter') could have been used in many contexts K for KALENDAE ('kalends, first of the month') in writing dates. All of the very few Roman *praenomina* were generally abbreviated. Relevant here are K for KAESO, C for GAIUS, O for GAIA, CN for GNAEUS, and Q for QVINTVS. Although it would have been possible to use C for CAESO and G for GAIUS, the force of tradition (dating back to a time when K was generally used instead of C before A, and no separate letter G existed) was obviously too strong.

⁴¹ On O for GAIA, see previous footnote. The symbol for CENTVRIA looks something like >, and is now [encoded in Unicode](#) as "Roman centurial sign".

⁴² In Roman law, Gaius and Gaia are the generic placeholder names used for (landowning) men and women, respectively, both in hypothetical examples and in recording formulaic legal expressions (to be replaced with the names of the individuals concerned when applied to a specific case). But this generic use also slipped into O taking on the function of the symbol W (an inverted M) as an abbreviation for MULIER, 'woman'. See Peter Keegan, "Roman Gaia and the Discourse of Patronage: Retrograde C in CIL VI", in: *Ancient Documents and their Context*, 2015, pp. 152–173.

⁴³ Velius ends the discussion of K here, not because he comes down on the side of those who reject the letter but because he has finished presenting the arguments on both sides. That the status of K is discussed in the first place shows, I would argue, that he accepts it as part of the alphabet. The controversy is part of a stable tradition of teaching, not a live issue.

⁴⁴ As a matter of fact, the letter Q has always been part of the Latin alphabet, and ultimately goes back (via Etruscan and an early Greek alphabet) to a Phoenician letter, just as C and V do. But of course there is much variation in letter shapes over time, and Velius may have seen variants (glyphs) of Q and CV that resembled each other.